



THE
**LOST
MUSEUM**

ROYAL CABINET
OF RARITIES IN
THE MAURITSHUIS

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PREFACE

MARTINE GOSSELINK
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Of the once so innovative, adaptable, inquisitive, multicultural and powerful little country on the North Sea – brimming with successful scientists, printer-publishers, entrepreneurs, artists, admirals and generals – little was left by 1815. Less than twenty years earlier, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which had been omnipresent in Asia for well-nigh 200 years, had gone bankrupt: a tremendous blow to the country's self-confidence. That same year, 1795, French revolutionary armies had invaded the Dutch Republic. They had taken over the country, after which they would remain in power – in various forms of governance – for two decades. It was not until the Congress of Vienna in 1815, after the fall of Napoleon, that the lines of Europe were redrawn. There too, the birth – or rebirth – of the Netherlands as a new kingdom was sealed. It was slightly larger than before the French invasion, since the Congress decided that the Southern provinces – roughly present-day Belgium – should be attached to the North.

The son of the Stadholder Prince William V was accorded the right to lead the new country as King William I. What he found was a 'calimero land' that in many respects suffered from an inferiority complex, in spite of its expansion to the south. People recalled nostalgically the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, which had been dubbed the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. How could that century be drawn on as an example for the citizens and rulers of the kingdom? This idea would serve as the basis for nineteenth-century Dutch nationalism. Old heroes and relics were dusted off and new ones created and inflated with the liberal use of creative licence.

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Part of this new nationalistic fervour, of course, was a drive to establish museums with objects produced at home. However, the French patriots had seized and removed the stadholders' collections – just as they had removed the art collections of the nobility, Church and king in their own country. William V's painting collection had ended up in the Louvre (named 'Musée Napoleon' in 1802), along with hundreds of other artworks looted from Europe and Egypt. King William I naturally set about trying to recover his father's stolen property from France. He was partly successful, recovering 130 of the 200 looted paintings. They would form the nucleus of the new Royal Cabinet of Paintings – the oldest nucleus of the current collection of the Mauritshuis. The stadholders' collections of rarities and naturalia were not returned. Those items that had not been looted, together with the relics of the House of Orange and other 'rare' objects, had been moved to a place of safety in good time. These, together with a number of key donations, formed the basis of the Royal Cabinet of Rarities (RCoR). The two Cabinets were installed in the Mauritshuis in 1822.

The nineteenth century was an age of colonialism and imperialism. The last places in the world that the Europeans had yet to explore were being mapped out and claimed by European countries. In that century, the expansionist zeal of the Netherlands went hand in hand with an influx of objects destined for collections such as those of the RCoR. In addition, donations steadily boosted the collection's growth. The ultimate goal in displaying the 10,000-odd objects in the RCoR was to stir the visitor's admiration for the new Netherlands, its heroic history, and its important role in the international arena. The presentation of the Japanese Room placed strong emphasis on the Netherlands' position as the only European country allowed to trade with Japan. That this trade scarcely yielded any profit by then was studiously omitted. In the rooms with objects from remote regions, visitors were encouraged to conclude that the Netherlands, as part of Western Europe, stood on the highest step of civilisation. Displays of Orange relics, some of them falsely linked to leading figures of the House of Orange, were intended to emphasise the bravery and self-sacrifice of the king's ancestors.

In short, it was a place of nationalist propaganda. Of course, the Netherlands was scarcely alone in pursuing such an agenda: nationalism was rampant throughout Europe. The decades of the RCoR's existence were a turbulent time for the Netherlands and for Europe in general: alongside this nationalist drive, the political system was undergoing democratisation and industrialisation was accelerating. In the Netherlands, where the economy rallied at the end of the nineteenth century, there were growing

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calls for a truly large national museum in Amsterdam. This precipitated the final closure of the RCoR in 1883. The collections were split up: objects relating to Dutch history and all items classified as artworks went to the new Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, while the ethnographic objects ended up in what is now Wereldmuseum Leiden.

With the exhibition *The Lost Museum*, we are temporarily reinstalling the RCoR – 140 years after its dissolution – in its original location. Over the past few years, the Mauritshuis has produced a new series of exhibitions on socio-historical themes, linked to its own history. In doing so, we reflect on the history of the building, the man after whom it is named – Johan Maurits – and the background of various museum collections over the centuries. After the exhibitions *Shifting Image: In search of Johan Maurits* and *Loot – 10 stories*, we now delve into the nineteenth-century collection and museum experience of the RCoR.

Many of the objects that were once displayed here in the RCoR are now exhibited here again. Today, however, we treat them differently. How do you reconstruct the experience of a lost nineteenth-century museum without actually living that history? In consultation with our lenders, we have made a clear decision not to display objects where there is any suspicion of looting. Dutch policy prescribes that where possible, looted objects must be returned to the countries from which they were taken. For instance, the Kandy Cannon – a cannon looted by the VOC from the royal palace in that city and falsely presented in the RCoR as a cannon belonging to Michiel de Ruyter – was recently returned to Sri Lanka. Also excluded from this reconstruction are objects that include human material such as bones, hair or teeth.

Museums have traditionally been seen as repositories, and as institutions of power and authority. Still, museum work is carried out by people. That means that erroneous or distorted interpretations and biases can arise under the influence of the *Zeitgeist*. With the selection of objects and stories in this exhibition, we create a time capsule of a lost museum: a case study of museum practices on which we can reflect in the present. This can heighten our awareness of the origins of ingrained patterns and ensure that we are quicker to recognise them in our own practice. In this way, we demonstrate how museums, which are today seeking to achieve inclusion and diversity, struggle with the legacy of precursor museums, their view of the world, their collecting strategies and interpretations. How can we dismantle the image-forming of people who were then considered 'different' and often even inferior? How do we deal with the

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colonial past and the objects entwined with it – objects that are tangible remnants of injustice? And what do we do with the centuries-old quest for an intangible concept such as ‘Dutch identity’? We see these issues reflected in contemporary social debates, both inside and outside our museums.

In recent decades, Dutch and international historians have become keenly aware of the ongoing influence of the nationalist view of history that was promulgated in the nineteenth century. Although the RCoR was dissolved almost 140 years ago, we are still dealing with the impact of that past. Knowing that each era creates its own view of history, we must ensure that, in the present era, we do not ourselves fall into the trap of focusing in a blinkered way on new assumptions. Examples of this presented themselves while preparing this book. Several times we read in the copy that people living in the nineteenth century were guilty of stereotyping. That may be so, and often was so, but as editors we wanted such assertions to be thoroughly substantiated. Criticisms of the nineteenth century should be based on facts: otherwise the pot is calling the kettle black and we are being short-sighted ourselves.

To this day, we continue to read in newspapers and textbooks assumptions that originated in the nineteenth century. We are slowly excising them. The interpretation of many of the objects has changed, research has not stood still. New information has come to light, myths have been debunked, and unanswered questions have been identified. But, to what extent are the RCoR and its ideas still visible, and to what extent do the stereotypes propagated at the time still resonate today? Is the lost museum really lost altogether?

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INTRODUCTION

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Justine Rinnooy Kan
Curator, Mauritshuis

Over 10,000 objects were displayed in five rooms. To be precise: five rooms on the ground floor of a seventeenth-century house that has been known since that century as the Mauritshuis. In 1822, King William I had redesignated the building a museum (fig. 1). He saw it as an elegant setting for two of his new Royal Cabinets. A visit must have been quite an experience. On the upper floor was the Royal Cabinet of Paintings, which had its own director. That museum still exists today. On the ground floor, objects – a multitude of objects – were crammed together in the Royal Cabinet of Rarities (RCoR). The RCoR was dissolved almost a century and a half ago, in 1883 – thus freeing up much-needed additional space on the ground floor for the collection of magnificent paintings. The rarities would eventually be divided between the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the precursor of the Wereldmuseum in Leiden.

The term ‘rarity’ leaves plenty of room for interpretation. Accordingly, a huge range of objects was collected for the RCoR. The first director, Reinier Pieter van de Kastele, was the institution’s originator and driving force; it was he who proposed the plan for a museum of this kind to the king. The impetus came from a major donation of over 3,000 Chinese objects from the estate of Jean Theodore Royer to King William I. The king supplemented this collection with relics of the House of Orange, such as the braids of his grandfather, Stadholder William IV, and other objects from his own family collection. Together these created the nucleus of the Cabinet, bringing Van de Kastele’s dream to fruition. Many donations from orangist private individuals followed, accompanied by sporadic purchases – for instance, of major collections of Japanese objects. Van de Kastele’s interest in ethnography, a science that was still in its infancy, placed a clear stamp on the museum’s development: thousands of ethnographic objects from many countries were added to the collection. The Ministry of Colonies was a stone’s throw from the Mauritshuis. The director forged close ties with ambassadors and other high-ranking officials posted abroad. At his instigation, shipments of objects were despatched from all over the world to The Hague, the vast majority from the Dutch colonies.

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1
The Netherlands (The Hague), Bartholomeus
Johannes van Hove, *The Mauritshuis in
The Hague*, 1825. Oil on panel, 62 x 72 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. SK-A-1369.

To secure acquisitions from foreign parts, the Kingdom of the Netherlands exploited the unequal power relations – that is, the power of the coloniser over the countries of origin. The collection brought visitors into contact with other cultures, but that encounter was not marked merely by curiosity about ‘the other’. The theory underlying the RCoR was based on the belief that the culture of Western Europe was superior to others and that the peoples of other parts of the world were still developing towards that supposed high level of civilisation. The educational narrative, as appears from the brief visitors’ guide of 1824, reflected this deeply-ingrained colonial Zeitgeist.

The RCoR’s director bore responsibility for the content of the entire collection: jewellery, dolls, armour, weapons, clothing, porcelain, glass and so on – and from all corners of the world. The custodian provided some assistance, as did his family, but the contrast with the current state of the museum world – fortunately – is enormous. For the 120-odd loans in this exhibition, we needed to contact over thirty curators. There is now plenty of expertise in the Netherlands regarding the history of the RCoR and the objects on display. This is reflected in dissertations, collection catalogues and other specialist and more general literature. This exhibition offers an ideal opportunity to bring together some of that scattered knowledge in concise contributions that, compiled in a single publication, tell the story of the RCoR. Or rather, *a* story. While it is fair to say that every exhibition and every compilation of essays is the result of a series of choices of objects and subjects, this is especially true of *The Lost Museum*. You cannot possibly do justice to 10,000 objects. So the story is necessarily incomplete: which themes and subject matter do we broach in the limited space of this book?

Gijs van der Ham outlines the rich institutional history of the RCoR. **Jan van Campen** focuses on the large bequest of Chinese objects from the collection of Jean Theodore Royer. **Rudolf Effert** analyses the Cabinet's unique – for the Netherlands – ethnographic profile. Co-editor and co-curator of the exhibition **Sheila Reda** discussed the historical objectives of the RCoR and how they were pursued in the museum. In another piece, she describes the many lives of the cannon of Kandy, recently returned to Sri Lanka. **Laura Smeets** writes about one of the king's sources of inspiration – the former stadholders' cabinet built up by his father. **Eveline Sint Nicolaas** investigates the history of a hat and two pistols belonging to members of the House of Orange – but which members? **Ellinoor Bergvelt** discusses how the RCoR measured up to other European museums in terms of modernity. **Mirjam Hoijtink** looks at the colonial context in which the museum operated and the resulting legacy. **Daan Kok** and **Daphne Martens** discuss the Netherlands' glorification of its trading relations with Japan and how it coloured the RCoR. **Marion Anker** examines the intriguing private donation of a drinking horn. **Dirk Jan Biemond** analyses the RCoR's collection of drinking cups and goblets. **Annette Schmidt** investigates the shipment of a large quantity of African objects from the Gold Coast. **Maartje Brattinga** sheds light on the glass engraver Willem van Heemskerck and his considerable collection of work in the Cabinet. **Ching-Ling Wang** discusses a Chinese ivory puzzle ball, also known as the 'work of the devil'. **Suzanne van Leeuwen** dives into the history of a remarkable item of jewellery shaped like a rooster. **Mirjam Shatanawi** discusses the transcultural nature of a group of paintings with scenes from the Ottoman Empire and its implications for cataloguing in museums. **Quentin Buvelot** writes about the Cabinet of Paintings in the days when it only occupied the upper floor of the Mauritshuis. **Shannon van Essen** takes a look at the RCoR's visitors. **Cunera Buijs** and **Sheila Reda** unravel the mystery surrounding the kayak hanging from the ceiling in room 4. **Martine Gosselink** analyses the misleading information about the 'susuhunan's beret' against the background of the Java War (in Indonesia the Diponegoro War). **Marjolein van Asdonck** investigates the multi-layered donation history of a valuable kris. **Priya Swamy** reflects on the absence of Sri Lankan objects in the exhibition. **Fanny Wonu Veys** discusses the collection of RCoR objects from Oceania and the historical relations between that region and the Netherlands. **Pim Westerkamp** focuses on the large collection of wayang puppets in the RCoR and their reception history. **François Janse van Rensburg** discusses South African leather dolls and the challenges posed by objects of this kind in the context of today's exhibition practices. **Wendeline Flores** reflects on the dioramas of the Surinamese artist Gerrit Schouten and the diverse perspectives from which they can be interpreted. **Erdogan Aykaç** analyses the collecting and cataloguing of Ottoman collections and the far-reaching implications of hierarchical and Eurocentric thinking in boxes.

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While the easiest way to absorb the content of the book may well be to read it from beginning to end, the texts are designed to be read separately and in random order. A certain amount of overlap, especially in indispensable background information, was therefore unavoidable. The wide variety of topics in the essays aptly reflects the varied nature of the Cabinet, which was filled with beautiful objects that still capture our attention. Yet certain recurrent themes are discernible. Nationalism, for instance, plays a key role. The museum was a convenient aid to the king's political agenda. When it was established, the Netherlands had just regained its sovereignty after some two decades of French rule. Stadholder William V had fled into exile in 1795 after the invasion of French troops. When the House of Orange regained power, and William V's son became the first king of the Netherlands, it was helpful to the new king to foster a renewed sense of national pride. The collection of the RCoR was an appropriate vehicle to achieve this, partly by embellishing and distorting facts in order to portray Dutch culture in as impressive and heroic a light as possible. This inflation of reality was a key feature of the RCoR and is therefore often broached in this book.

The power relations between the Netherlands and the countries that were represented by objects in the RCoR is a common theme in several essays. International – and especially colonial – relations greatly influenced both the acquisition of objects and the stories told about them in the museum. The RCoR institutionalised stereotypes and embedded them in the manner of its displays. Such stereotypes – whether positive or negative, about cultures near and far – can be hard to eradicate. The ever-present influence in today's world of images formed in the nineteenth century is therefore an important theme – not just in this book, but also in contemporary society. From museums to governments: countries are increasingly re-examining their own national histories through this lens. The past 150 years have not witnessed a linear progress of increasing awareness. Interest has been kindled at most institutions only in the past decade, thanks occasionally to voices from within, but more often in response to voices in society at large. The story of the RCoR as told in this book is based on recent research questions and results, but the developments of the past few decades compel a certain humility. It is to be hoped that the growth in research and interest in this field will continue. If so, this book may soon become a document that reflects our own deeply embedded Zeitgeist.

As is often the case with things that have been lost, at the time of writing, the RCoR is little known. That is, aside from among specialists in the field, many of whom have willingly contributed, to our great pleasure and gratitude, to this publication. Together with the public, we have been able to pluck the Cabinet from obscurity. Welcome to *The lost museum*.

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RARITIES IN THE MUSEUM LANDSCAPE, 1816-1883

Gijs van der Ham
Senior Curator of History
2001-2021, *Rijksmuseum*

'If God had told Noah to take two of every kind of object, without giving him time to neatly arrange them, I think it would have ended up a jumble much like this collection'. This was the scathing assessment of the Royal Cabinet of Rarities (RCoR) delivered by Victor de Stuers in his article 'Holland op zijn smalst', published in the journal *De Gids* at the end of 1873.¹ While De Stuers's polemic lambasted the entire state of the arts and culture in the Netherlands, he singled out this museum as the worst offender. He described it savagely as 'a pawnshop that has been abandoned to decay', called its collection catalogue downright 'ridiculous' and concluded that there was 'not a single foreigner who is not mocking us [Dutch people] about it'. De Stuers was not the first to express open contempt for the RCoR. David van der Kellen Jr had observed back in 1860 that the objects were 'densely packed and hard to view'. Two years later several members of parliament did not disguise their disdain for it in a debate in the House of Representatives. Yet it was this museum that had been founded in 1816 with a fanfare of panache and ambition, as part of a reinvigorated museum system in the Netherlands (see Reda, p. 39).

More than Chinese

No fewer than three museums had been launched in The Hague on 1 July 1816. All three were Royal Cabinets: A Cabinet of Paintings, a Cabinet of Coins and Medals (*Penningen*), and a Cabinet of Chinese Rarities. These names were very telling. The epithet 'Royal' showed that these museums enjoyed the direct patronage of King William I, and that at least the nucleus of their collections had been the property of the Orange dynasty. True, these were state institutions that did not belong to the king, but the interests of state and sovereign largely coincided. While the term 'Cabinet' underscored the initially small-scale, private nature of the new institutions, their names also identified distinct collecting areas. 'Paintings' were self-explanatory, '*Penningen*' included medals, medallions, coins and cut stones; only the

term ‘rarities’ was rather vague and general. This third name recalled the numerous collections from earlier centuries that were known as cabinets of rarities and that usually consisted of an eclectic assemblage of objects that had captured the collector’s fascination.

The over 3,000 mostly Chinese (with some Japanese) rarities had been bequeathed to King William I less than two years before by the widow of the collector Jean Theodore Royer (see Van Campen, p. 24). The Hague clergyman Reinier Pieter van de Kastele had been asked to draw up an inventory of the objects. He was the perfect man for the job, since it was Van de Kastele’s dearest wish to create a real museum in The Hague – not only to the greater glory of the new sovereign, but also as the ‘jewel of the nation’, as an inspiration for ‘national industry’ and to disseminate knowledge of ‘exotic and native products of craftsmanship and nature’, as he wrote in a long memorandum in 1814.² On 1 July 1816 he was duly appointed superintendent of the new Cabinet. After just a few days, the king – who had identical ambitions – removed the word ‘Chinese’ from the name, and promoted Van de Kastele to director. The name change was because the collection had immediately undergone a substantial expansion, acquiring many objects that had nothing to do with Asia. For the king had decided to transfer ‘a large, precious collection of objects of diverse kinds’, including weapons, miniature portraits, and personal items belonging to his ancestors.

The king’s gesture gave Van de Kastele an opportunity to collect more ‘objects of diverse kinds’ and hence to widen the museum’s appeal. He urged everyone, from government ministries, Dutch dignitaries and diplomats at foreign missions to ordinary members of the public to send items for the collection. Spanish castanets, Turkish turbans, cardboard fish crafted in Suriname, paper cutouts from Middelburg – ‘everything sent to me is welcome and always worth the freight charge’, said Van de Kastele in 1821 (figs. 1, 2). The result was an influx of unusual objects, including former property of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) transferred in 1820 by the Ministry of Colonies, and model ships from the Ministry of the Navy. The RCoR collection expanded rapidly in the early years and became ever more eclectic.

The Royer and Orange collections were not just the foundations of the museum, but also determined to a large extent what could be added. For while some came from all corners of the earth (see Hoijtink, p. 59), others were typically Dutch objects that were related to national history or exemplified Dutch craftsmanship.

To give the collection a sharper focus, Van de Kastele was sometimes permitted from 1820 onwards to make purchases himself, such as Petronella Oortman’s dolls’ house in 1822 – then thought to have been commissioned by ‘Czar Peter of Russia’ (fig. 3). The king himself also



1
Spain, *Castanets*, c.1800-1822. Wood, string, 6.5 x 4 x 2.1 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. BK-NM-7457.



2
Turkey, *Headdress for Ottoman soldier*, before 1827. Suede or velvet, 40.5 x 24.5 x 14.5 cm. Leiden, Wereldmuseum, inv. RV-360-1811.

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remained active: that same year he added a large European applied arts collection, with objects he had purchased earlier from a Brussels collector and originally allocated to a museum in that other capital city of his kingdom. Now he closed that museum, distributing its collection among museums in the North – the majority to the RCoR.

In the very month of his appointment – July 1816 – Van de Kastele had gone to see the director of the Rijksmuseum, Cornelis Apostool, in Amsterdam. It was more than an introductory visit: Van de Kastele was on the lookout for ‘rarities’ there. The Rijksmuseum was the successor institution to the National Art Gallery, founded in 1798 as the museum of the new Dutch unitary state – the Batavian Republic – established three years earlier. Following the French conquest, the old republic had been dissolved, the stadholder had fled the country, and the remaining property of the Orange dynasty had been confiscated, ending up, along with objects from other dissolved ‘old’ institutions, in this new museum. Like the museums established in 1816, then, the Rijksmuseum was born from an essential change in the Constitution.

From the outset, the Rijksmuseum – as a pre-eminently national museum – managed a collection full of objects related to the nation’s history. This was Van de Kastele’s focus. After all, thanks to the king, his museum was now the place where Dutch objects belonged. It was five years later – on 8 May 1821 – when the Minister of Public Education finally informed the directors of all national collections of his intention to restructure the collections to strengthen the identity of all museums. Apostool was furious, rightly interpreting the move as signalling a narrowing of his institution’s range. He was left with only paintings and prints – though hardly the least of these. In contrast, Van de Kastele felt that the decision had ‘opened up the pleasant vista’ of making his museum an integrated whole – although he too had to cede objects to other museums. Henceforth, the scope of the RCoR’s collection was defined as ‘Art Objects (with the exception of Fine Art [paintings, prints, etc.]) from the Middle Ages, and in general of Peoples still living today’ – still a very wide-ranging remit. Apostool dragged his feet, but four years later he had to relinquish all the objects under his care to The Hague.

In the Mauritshuis

From 1822 onwards, five rooms on the ground floor of the Mauritshuis were open, two days a week, to members of the public who were ‘well dressed and unaccompanied by children’ and wanted to view this ever-expanding collection (see Van Essen, p. 107). On the main floor, visitors could view the Cabinet of Paintings. The 1824 Visitor Guide explained that the primary aim was to cultivate understanding for other peoples, especially those outside Europe. The arrangement of the